

“ABRAHAM LINCOLN”

Address of Hon. J. P. Dolliver

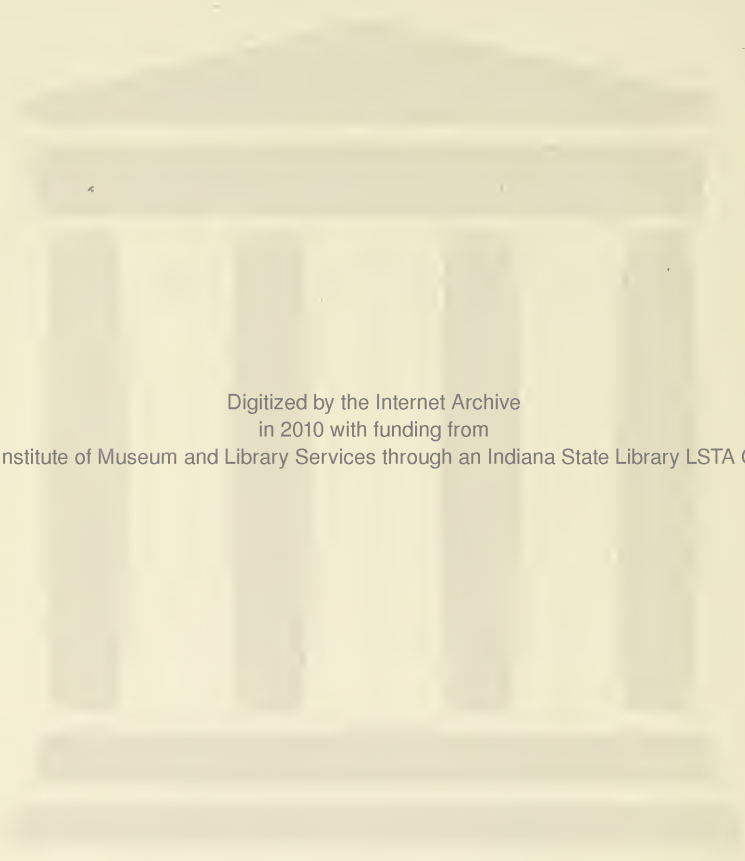
United States Senator from Iowa

AT THE

Annual Banquet

Chamber of Commerce of Pittsburgh

FEBRUARY 12, 1908



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
The Institute of Museum and Library Services through an Indiana State Library LSTA Grant

ADDRESS OF SENATOR DOLLIVER

GENTLEMEN OF THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OF PITTSBURGH:

IT is a very great pleasure to me to have the opportunity again of visiting this goodly city and enjoying the hospitality of its people. I have had for a good many years the pleasure of an intimate association with the distinguished men who have spoken for Pittsburgh in the National Councils. For about twenty years, with John Dalzell (great applause) who never lost an opportunity to serve the people of the United States by serving the great industrial interests of your community. With my friend from the other side of the river, Brother Graham, (applause) who made himself famous the first day in the House of Representatives by a speech on the resources of Pittsburgh that read in the Record almost like an astronomical calculation. (Applause.)

Nor need I speak of Burke and Barchfeld, and I certainly have no need here to say a word in apology of the Senator whom Pittsburgh has contributed to the public life of our times. (Great applause.) I reckon I have known him longer than any of you, because we were boys together upon the Monongahela towards the mountains of West Virginia, where we both cropped out. We went to school together and I have loved him from childhood. He had hard luck in the institution of learning which we were attending.

They separated him from the pursuit of knowledge and sent him home. I have always sympathized with him about that. We were together that night. They caught him. In the confusion I escaped. (Great applause.) And you need not a word from me to show that from those good old times I have followed him and have joined with you in honoring him as one of the great lawyers, the greatest, I think, of our Attorney Generals, and now one of our greatest and most honored Senators. (Prolonged applause.)

You have asked me to do a very hard thing—to speak about Abraham Lincoln. I do not know how I will make out with a theme like that. He did not live very long in this world, less than sixty years, and only ten years of that time visible above the dead level of our affairs. And yet into that ten years were crowded events so far-reaching and stupendous in their ultimate significance that to this day we can hardly pick up the book which records them without a strange feeling coming over us that maybe, after all, we are not reading about a man at all, but about some sublime, automatic figure in the hands of the infinite power being used to help and to bless the human race. (Applause.)

I have heard some men say that he was a great lawyer. I do not think he was anything of the kind. It is true that he had a mind peculiarly adapted to understand the principles of the common law, and his faculties appear so normal that he did not need a commentary nor a copy of the Madison papers, thumb-marked by the doubts and fears of three or four generations, to enable him to see that the men who made the Constitution of the United States were building for eternity. (Applause.)

And yet he practiced law without a library and everybody who knew him knew that he was of absolutely no account in a lawsuit unless he knew that right was on his side.

It seemed to have gone against his intellectual, as well as his moral grain, that curious precept of Lord Bacon's that a man cannot tell whether a cause is good or bad until the jury has brought in the verdict. (Laughter.) The old judicial circuit about Springfield, where he used to practice law, where he called everybody by their first name, and everybody loved to hear him talk, did much for him in many ways. But the eminent jurists who surround those who are with us tonight will agree with me that a man who has not the foresight to exact a retainer, nor the energy to collect a fee after he has earned it, such a man, whatever else may be said of him, is not by nature cut out for a lawyer. (Great laughter.)

I have talked with various of the lawyers who practiced with him on that circuit, and from what I have heard them say I have come to the conclusion that even then the notion was slowly forming in his mind that he held a brief with power of attorney from on high for the unnumbered millions of his fellow men and was only loitering about the county seats of Illinois until the case came on for trial.

There are some who say that he was a great orator. If that is so, the standard of the schools, ancient and modern, must be thrown away. Maybe they ought to be. (Laughter.) And if they are, this circuit rider of the law, refreshing his companions with wit and wisdom from the well of English undefiled, this champion of civil liberty, confuting the Douglas with remorseless logic, with homely phrases enriched by proverbial literature, this advocate of the people standing head and shoulders above his brethren, presenting their case at the bar of history in sentences so simple that a child can follow them, such a one will surely not be denied a place among the masters who have added something to the triumphs of the mother tongue.

He was disappointed in the little speech he made at Gettysburg and he said that the oration of Mr. Everett was the best thing he had ever heard. But Mr. Everett himself without a moment for reflection perceived that that little piece of crumpled paper which he held in his hand that day would be treasured from generation to generation long after his own laborious utterance had been forgotten.

The old school of oratory and the new met that day under the trees and among the groves and congratulated one another. They have not met very often since, for both of them have been pushed aside to make room for the essayists, the declaimers, the statistician and the whole tribe of peddlers of intellectual wares who have descended like a swarm on all human deliberations. (Great laughter and applause.)

I have heard it said that he was a great statesman. If by that you mean that he was better educated than other people, that he understood better than anybody else the party policy of the political organization to which he was attached nearly all his life, there is very little evidence of that at all. He followed the fortunes of the old Whig party through evil as well as good report. He stumped the county and afterwards the state, but neither he nor anybody else thought the speeches which he made important enough to be recorded. He had a very simple platform from the start: "I am a believer in a National Bank, in the system of internal improvements, and in a high protective tariff." (Applause.) Half his lifetime he followed Henry Clay more like a lover than a disciple, and yet when the great popular leader died and Mr. Lincoln was invited to make a memorial address at the old state house in Springfield, he had not a word to say about the principles of the old party creed, but he devoted every moment of his time to a consid-

eration of that love for humanity and that devotion to liberty which shone even to the end in that superb career of Henry Clay. (Applause.) When you describe Abraham Lincoln as a statesman you open no secret of his biography. You rather degrade the epic grandeur of the drama in which he moved. Of course, he was a statesman. Exactly so Paul of Tarsus setting out from Damascus became afterwards a celebrated traveler, and Christopher Columbus, inheriting a taste for the sea, gradually developed to be a mariner of more than local repute. (Laughter.)

I have heard it said by people who claim to have studied the official record of the Confederate and Union armies, that Abraham Lincoln was a rare military genius, better able than his generals to order the movements of great armies. I do not believe that that is so. He got into the War Department by the exigencies of the times, and if he towered above the ill-fitting uniforms which made their way by a process of honor to places of high command in the earlier years of the Civil War, it is no matter of praise after all. But this must be said, he understood better than anybody else the size of the undertaking in which he was engaged. And he watched until his eyes were weary for somebody that could grasp the situation and make out of the army what he knew was in it. It almost broke his heart, this constant quarreling among the officers about matters that were for the most part unintelligible to the outside world. When he passed the command of the army of the Potomac over to Hooker, he did it in terms of reprimand and admonition that read almost like a father's last warning to a wayward son. He told him he had abused the confidence of his country. He had wronged his fellow officers, and referring to Hooker's insubordinate suggestion that the army and the government both needed a dictator,

he called his attention to the fact that only generals who won victories could set up dictatorships and then he added with a humor, grim as death: "You go and win victories, and I will risk the dictatorship." If General Hooker did not tear up his commission when he got that letter it only showed that he had moral heroism that could bear the severity of the naked truth.

Yet all the while Mr. Lincoln was looking and at last he got his eye upon a man of the west who seemed to be doing a fairly good military business down in Tennessee, a copious worker and fighter, but not a very copious writer, as he said afterwards in a telegram to Burnside. And he liked the looks of this man. He always seemed to square the event with his plans. He never "Regretted to report," and accordingly when Vicksburg had fallen and Gettysburg had been fought and the tide of invasion had been rolled back from the borders of Maryland and Pennsylvania, he wrote two letters, one to General Meade, reproving him in harsh terms for failing to follow up the Gettysburg victory, and the other to General Grant, asking him to report immediately at Washington for duty. (Applause.) The letter to General Meade, which now is resting quietly in Mr. Nicolay's collection of the writings of Lincoln, all the fire of its wrath long since gone out, was never sent. But General Grant got his. And from that hour we heard no more of military orders from the White House, not even exhortations to move upon the enemy's works. He left it all to the new commander. He did not give up his own ideas of how the job ought to be done, but he never even ventured to ask General Grant to tell him how he thought it ought to be done. He left it all to him. And as the plan of the great captain unfolded he sent from Washington to the headquarters in Virginia this

exultant message: "I begin to see it. You will succeed. God bless you all. A. Lincoln." (Applause.) And so these two, each adding something to the other's fame, go down to history together, God's blessing falling like a gentle benediction upon the memory of both. (Applause.)

While he lived very few people seemed to be able to understand him. Mr. Seward, the most able member of his cabinet, insulted him. Mr. Stanton, afterwards known as the organizer of victory, wrote a mean letter about him after Bull Run to James Buchanan, then living quietly at his country seat at Wheatland, near the Capitol. From the old office of the Tribune of the Common people, where for more than a generation Mr. Greeley exercised an influence now unknown in the American newspaper world, came a letter filled with a curious mixture of enterprise and despair, a despair that, after seven sleepless nights, had given up the fight, the kind of enterprise still noticeable in the newspaper world which desired to have the first notice of the inevitable surrender that he thought was coming on. "You are not considered a great man," he wrote to the President's eye alone. Who is this sitting on an old worn out sofa in the public offices of the White House just after the battle near Washington, receiving deputations from the Military and Civil branches of the government, including scared Congressmen, as they poured across the long bridge from Virginia to tell their tale of woe to the only man in Washington that had patience enough left to listen to them? Is it the log cabin student who learned to read lying in front of the fireplace in the cabin in the woods of Indiana? It is he. Is it the country lawyer traveling about from one county seat to another airing his views before the Court Houses with no baggage except a saddle bag containing a clean shirt and a code of Illinois? It is he. Is it the ad-

venturous voyager of the Mississippi River who got ideas of lifting flatboats over riffles as he tried to navigate an uncertain channel and ideas broad as the skies for lifting nations out of barbarism, as he traced the divine image in the faces of men and women put up at auction in the slave market of New Orleans? It is he. Is it the awkward farm boy of the old Sangamon, who covered up his bare feet in the fresh dirt at the end of the furrow in order not to get them sunburned as he rested for a few moments to refresh himself with old books that he had borrowed from neighbors? It is he. Is it the daring debater blazing out for a moment in the momentous warning, "a house divided against itself cannot stand," and then falling back with the defenses of the constitution in order that the cause of liberty, already hindered by the folly of its friends, might not become an outlaw in the land? It is he. Is it the weary traveler setting out for the Capitol bidding his friends good-bye and begging their prayers while he talked to them in a mysterious way about One who could go with him and stay with them and be everywhere for good? It is he.

They said that he laughed that night on the sofa in the public offices of the White House. And they told strange stories about how he looked, and the comic papers of London and New York made brutal pictures of his big hands—hands that were about to be stretched out to save the civilization of the world; of his overgrown feet—feet that for four torn and bleeding years were not weary in the service of the human race. They said that his clothes did not fit him—that he was awkward and ungainly in his appearance, and more than one of them recalled the courtly graces of manner that had been brought home from St. James and they began to say that this being a backwoodsman was no longer a recommendation for the

Presidency of the United States. Little did they understand how soon the time would come when that rude cabin on the edge of the hill country in Kentucky would be transfigured by the tender imagination of the people until it became more stately than the White House, more royal than all the palaces of the earth. It did not shelter the childhood of a king, but there is one thing in the world at least, more royal than a king; it is a man. (Great applause.)

And so they said he jested and looked strangely from one to another in the crowd. They did not know him or they might have seen that he was not looking at the crowd at all; that he was girding his immortal spirit for his ordeal, and if he laughed, how did they know that he did not hear the cheerful voices from above. For he certainly had been taught that he that sitteth in the heavens sometimes laughs and holds in derision the impotent plans of men to turn aside the everlasting purposes of God. (Applause.) The whole world now knows his stature. By the light of the campfires of victorious armies his countrymen at last found out how to size up his gigantic figure, how to assess his character, how to comprehend the majesty of his conscience. And when finally the nation bore him affectionately towards the grave, through their tears they saw him exalted above all thrones in the affections of the human race.

We sometimes speak of the Civil War as an affair of armies, for we are a military people, and our tendency in that direction needs no cultivation—or at least very little. And yet it requires no very keen insight into the hidden things of history to see that this conflict was not waged on fields of battle, was not between armed forces, was not under the walls of besieged cities. It was not even the fight of his own country or of a passing generation. And

the thing that made Abraham Lincoln greater than all his generals, greater than all his admirals, greater than all the armies that answered his proclamation, was the simple fact that he bore the ark of the covenant. He had his alliance with the Lord of Hosts. The stars in their courses were fighting for him with infinite reinforcement at his call. His battle was not in the wilderness of Virginia, the fight was not in the woods around the old church at Shiloh. It was not against insurrection of the slave power; he was hand to hand with a rebellion older than human selfishness and greed; a rebellion that for centuries had made the government of the world a mere succession of despotisms, a dull recital of the failures and misfortunes of mankind. And so he was caught up like Ezekiel of old, the Prophet of Israel, and stood at the east gate of the Lord's house, and when he heard it said unto him, these are the men who devise mischief, he understood what the vision meant. For no man who ever lived in this world knew better than he what this endless mysterious struggle of our poor fallen humanity is and how the American Republic had fallen away from its duty and from its opportunity. All his lifetime he had heard ringing in his ears a little sentence taken from an old document that had been passed along carelessly from one Fourth of July celebration to another for nearly a century, "All men are created equal." To Abraham Lincoln that sounded strangely like an answer to a question asked by one of the eldest of the Hebrew Sages, "If I despise the cause of my man servant or my maid servant when he contendeth with me, what shall I do when God riseth up? Did not he that made me make him, and did not One fashion us in the womb?" Did not he that made me make him? A strategic

question that has got to be answered right before democracy or any other form of civil liberty can make any further headway in this world. (Applause.) All men are created equal, yet he had heard that sentence, touching the foundations of the world as it does, ridiculed, and explained away. And it was his mission to come to its defense. He took the manuscript of Thomas Jefferson and saved it permanently from obloquy and contempt. He explained exactly what our ancestors meant when they founded this institution and therein he reached the spiritual height, the mountain top, from which he sent down to his countrymen that inspiring message, "The war for the Union is the people's conflict to make certain whether there shall be preserved in this world that form and substance of government the object of which is to remove the obstacles from the pathway of all, to open the avenues of honorable employment for all, and to give to all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life." (Applause.)

I thank God that the war for the Union ended as it did. That we are one people, with one hope, and one history, and one destiny among the nations and in the midst of the ages. At bottom our political faith in the United States is really the same faith. As Democrats we repeat the words of Thomas Jefferson, "Equal rights to all;" as Republicans we treasure the words of Abraham Lincoln, "An unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life." Nor is the day very far off when the American people shall lay up in grateful hearts the blunt and fearless platform of Theodore Roosevelt, "A fair deal." (Tremendous applause.) A square deal for every man, no more, no less. The doctrine is the same. And if it is not so, there is no foundation at all for institutions such as ours. But it is everlasting.

ingly true, and by the blood of Abraham Lincoln the American people, without regard to political party, swear to make that good for all men and for all the future ages of the history of the American Republic. (Great and prolonged applause.)

